

Women, Indians protest video game of violent sex

By Lou Lumenick
Staff Writer

NEW YORK — George Armstrong Custer may have died with his boots on, but a controversial new video game raises questions about what else he was wearing at Little Big Horn.

In Custer's Revenge, a male cartoon figure — flesh-colored except for a blue cowboy hat and blue boots — wanders across a cactus-strewn video desert, dodging arrows. If the player manipulating Custer fails to avoid the arrows or cacti, he leaps out of his boots and taps plays in the background. But if the Indian fighter is successful in his trek, Custer gets to ravish an "Indian maiden" tied to a brown stake — and the player gets to score.

Predictably, Custer's Revenge last night drew a few arrows from American Indian and feminist groups. About 250 persons picketed a trade show at the New York Hilton for the debut of Custer's Revenge and two other adult video games.

The protesters claimed that Custer's Revenge glorifies rape and perpetuates Indian stereotypes. The distributors of the games, which are compatible with the popular Atari home-video consoles, said Custer's Revenge was meant only to amuse adult players. The distributors did not seem particularly perturbed by the picketers, who drew television coverage that seemed to aid immeasurably in what the firm's literature described as a "superaggressive publicity blitz" to promote the games.

"These games were created to fill a tremendous void in the market," said Joe Martin, the games' designer. "Adults get tired of shooting down spaceships."

Martin showed off his handiwork on three TV screens in a small booth that adjoined another where videotapes giving instructions on testing cocaine quality were being proffered. Martin's second adult game is called "Bachelor Party" and the third has an title not casually repeated in a family newspaper. All three are described by the slogan of American Multiple Industries, the distributor of the Japanese-made games: "When You Score ... You Score."

"Our intention was to market an adult video game that would bring some laughs, some smiles. We certainly didn't expect this protest," said Stuart Kesten, president of AMI, a Northridge, Calif., firm which is marketing the games under the trade name Mystique. He said he hopes to sell 500,000 of the games (at \$49.99 retail) by Christmas.

"The content of these games are R, not X-rated," said Kesten, a Wayne native whose forehead glistened with perspiration as he faced tough questions from a woman radio reporter. "The Indian woman isn't being raped. She even smiles and kicks up her heels when the man engages her."

No smiles outside hotel

There weren't any smiles down on the Avenue of the Americas, where the marchers — several in Indian dress — carried multicolored placards denouncing the games and alternated chants of "AMI is racist" with "1, 2, 3, 4, We Won't Take it Any More ... 5, 6, 7, 8, AMI promotes woman hate."

Representatives of Women Against Pornography and the New York Chapter of the National Organization of Women complained that the game trivializes rape as an

erotic experience.

"It's easy to say we're prudes and we don't like sex," said Virginia Corneu, the executive director of New York-NOW, which last week launched a national petition campaign against the games. "But I like sex that is erotic and promotes a healthy relationship between the sexes. This game plays upon the fears of both sexes and pushes us further apart."

Custer's Revenge drew the ire of Rudy Martin, a spokesman for the American Indian Community House, a nonprofit cultural and social organization which claims to represent the 14,000 Indians in the metropolitan area.

"Would the caricaturization of a people be acceptable if it showed [Israel Prime Minister] Begin attacking a Palestinian woman, Prince Charles chasing a female IRA member, or Hitler having his way with a naked Jewish maiden? We think not," he said. "The only result this game will have will be to promote a ... reinforcement of the stereotyping of American Indians as something less than human."

The three games also were criticized by Atari Inc., which manufactures the home-video game system on which the cartridges are designed to be played. In a statement issued yesterday from its headquarters, Atari, the largest company in the home-video game field, called the cartridges "offensive."

"Atari takes a very dim view of this use of our product," said Michael Moone, president of Atari's consumer electronics division. "Unfortunately, some individuals take refuge behind certain legal precepts in the dismay of the majority of the people."

Drew avid audience

Custer's Revenge and the other adult games received less-critical reviews on the second floor of the Hilton, where they drew an avid audience at the National Music, Sound, and Video show.

Marc Queller, who owns the Video Track store in Marlboro, N.J., said he was undeterred by the protests and had ordered 96 copies of each game. "It's just a game and people don't have to buy it if they don't want to," he said.

Randi Hacker, senior editor of Electronic Fun magazine, said she thought that the games would sell well at first but had doubts about their staying power.

"My reviewers thought that the graphics weren't all that good," she said. "I think they'll sell as a novelty item, but I wonder whether people will play the games for any length of time."

Was Ms. Hacker offended by the sexual themes?

"No, I thought they were very funny in concept. Some people are taking these games too seriously."

Besides the feminist and Indian groups, one person who definitely isn't laughing is George Armstrong Custer III.

In a telephone interview from his Pebble Beach, Calif., home, the Indian fighter's 59-year-old great-grand-nephew bristled at the thought of Custer's Revenge.

"This sort of thing is completely denigrating to him as an individual," Custer said, referring to his famous forebear. "He was a teetotaler and one of the most moral people who ever lived. To have some jerk PR man come up with this gimmick is a cheap shot."